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SOME UNPUBLISHED LETTERS OF ALEXANDER WILSON AND JOHN ABBOT.

BY WITMER STONE.

LETTERS of those in whose footsteps we are following and whose interests are our interests are always entertaining. Especially is this the case when it is supposed that all the existing letters of a writer have been collected and published. This being true of Alexander Wilson, my pleasure can readily be imagined when I recently came across three unpublished letters bearing his signature, stored away in the fireproof of the library of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia. With them was one from John Abbot of Georgia, a correspondent of Wilson, well known as a collector and portrayer of insects.¹ Through the courtesy of Dr. Edward J. Nolan, Librarian of the Academy, I am able to present these four letters to the readers of 'The Auk.'

The first letter was written by Wilson while he was living in Philadelphia engaged in editing the 'American Cyclopædia', and addressed to Bartram at his home, across the Schuylkill, now Bartram's Garden in West Philadelphia.

¹ Abbot was born in England about 1760 and at an early age was sent to America by several prominent entomologists. He remained in Georgia and was still alive in 1840 (according to Swainson). Many of his paintings and notes were published as Smith and Abbot's Lepidopterous Insects of Georgia, 1797.

Number two is to his publishers, Mess. Bradford and Inskeep, written while he was canvassing for the *Cyclopædia* and the *Ornithology*, and incidentally contains some remarks of historic interest. Number three is to Abbot and contains more ornithology than probably any letter of Wilson that is extant.

Number four is from Abbot to Ord when the latter was engaged in completing Wilson's unfinished work.

I. WILSON TO BARTRAM.

Philad^a May 22^d, 1807

Dear Sir

With this you will receive V. 4 part 1st. of the *Am. Cyclopaedia*. It would have been sent a week ago but for want of an opportunity.

By the impressions of my two first plates that accompany this you will see that I have a request to make to Miss Bartram if the state of her health will permit. We want well coloured specimens of the plates to be sent to Boston, Charleston, New York &c. and as my time will not permit me to do them myself I have presumed to apply to her to colour the impressions that are sent with this, according to the specimens that accompany them, for which I shall make any return. Perhaps Mary Leech might be set to some parts of them with safety which would lessen the drudgery.

If this request should be considered as disagreeable you will not I am sure impute it to any motives but those of the highest esteem for those to whom I make it, and the impressions may be returned tomorrow by any safe conveyance with perfect good nature on both sides.

In washing the blue Jay the most difficult part of the process is to lay on the colour without being streaked (which you will see I have not succeeded in) and in giving the true tint which I think is nearly approached in the specimen. Nothing but a wash is necessary as the engraving must be seen thro the colour.

But you know the whole affair ten times better than I can pretend to and as I shall be engaged in Drawing on Sunday I beg you would drop me a line tomorrow by Mr. Leech.

With sincere and affectionate wishes for your happiness and that of the family

I remain as ever

Dear Sir

Your much obliged friend

Alex. Wilson.

Mr. Bartram

P. S. The yellow bird has been coloured with a too dull yellow and the *breast* of the hanging bird may be more of a vermilion.

II. WILSON TO MESSRS. BRADFORD & INSKEEP.

New York, Oct. 2d, 1807.

Dear Sir

I have visited the whole Booksellers of New York distributed your letters and exhibited the specimens of the Ornithology, called on a number of gentlemen to whom I had been recommended and having done everything here for both works that I have been able I shall leave New York tomorrow and pass slowly through N. Jersey so as to be home some time early next week

Messrs. Brisbane and Brannan declined engaging for any number of copies of the Ornithology but reserved their offers until the first number should be published. The specimens attracted general admiration and few or no subscribers. When I called on Dr. Miller there were two other gentlemen of the faculty with him who desired me to put down one subscription for the College and two or three other gentlemen have subscribed. I have called on Dr. Mitchell three different times but have not yet seen him, Dr. Miller however with whom I breakfasted yesterday has promised to make respectful mention of the Ornithology in the Medical Journal. As soon as the steam boat returned from Albany I called on Mr. Fulton and mentioned some particulars in the article Canal which I was anxious he should see before its publication, gave him your address and presented him with a specimen of the Ornithology letter press &c. with which he was much pleased and will call on you sometime next week to examine what they have said of himself under "Canal" etc and if not too late to add what observations may seem necessary. This steam boat which

threatens to deprive all the other passage boats and stages of business arrived yesterday forenoon after a passage of 160 miles in 27 hours carrying upwards of 60 passengers at 7 dollars each besides their goods and set off this forenoon at ten o'clock with a heavy sea and strong gale approaching to a storm right in the teeth as we usually say. The wharves and vessels were crowded with spectators many of them dubious of her meeting such a sea but as soon as the machinery was put in motion she shot through the water as steady and level as a line midst the shouts of the multitude

I am with sincere esteem

Dear Sir

Yours

Alex. Wilson.

III. WILSON TO ABBOT.

Philad^a Jany. 23^d 1812

Dear Sir

I this day rec'd a small box containing a roll of Drawings 3 in number which I myself delivered to Dr. Barton also a *small* package directed to Wm. Bartram which has also been sent to him, and 4 Birds viz. the small Crow, female solitary Flycatcher, and the male and female Ground dove all in good order. The Crow and the Flycatcher I had already figured. The other two were very welcome; you will please to draw on me thro Mr. Oemler for the amount of these 4 & any other you may send, at the rate I mentioned, & I hereby empower him to pay you accordingly. Please to send the Chuck wills widow (male) and egg, and the beautiful rare Sparrow you mention, also the striped Wren. I do not know the large green-billed Woodpecker, nor any woodpecker as large as the Woodcock, if you know of such be so good as to send me one. The Slate-coloured ricebird is a species of Grosbeak, about the size of the rice-bird, and the black-headed green warbler is common in the Bahamas and sometimes comes to Georgia. It is not the Hooded Warbler. The Crossbill you mention is I suppose the female of the common one. It is green olive. When I was in Mississippi Territory two years ago I shot the small yellow Warbler with rust coloured spots on the back.

My 5th Volume is nearly ready for publication and I have nearly got through all the Land birds. Any remarkably rare Hawks or Owls will be very welcome particularly the Swallow-tailed. Be so good as to mention the colour of the bill, eyes and legs and any other fugitive parts. I shall also be glad of any anecdote relative to their manners, nest, eggs &c.

I will send you a list of *all* the Land & Water Birds which I have yet to draw, marking those with a *star* that I think you can furnish me with. In the mean time send me the by first opportunity what you can in a strong box directed to A. Wilson, care of Bradford & Inskip, Booksellers, Philada. Let me know if there be anything here which I can do for you and I will do it with pleasure. Can you inform me of the nest or eggs &c of the Ground Dove. I wish you could procure me any particulars of this beautiful little Dove. I presume they are migratory. I hope you will soon get quit of that distressing complaint the *Rheumatism*.

How is my friend Dr. Baldwin & what has become of him. As I will send Mr. Oemler the Volumes 3, 4 & 5 in a few weeks (5 or 6) you will be able to see the Birds I have already described.

I hope you will embrace the *first opportunity* of sending me another package, and write me at the same time by post mentioning the name of the Vessel. Compliments to Mr. Oemler and my best wishes for your health and happiness

With great esteem

Your sincere well wisher

Alex. Wilson

Mr. Abbot

IV. ABBOT TO ORD.

Mr. George Ord

Naturalist

Philadelphia

Scriven County Georgia Mar. 1814

Sir:

I received your Letter last week of Dec^r last and from the great esteem and respect to the memory of your friend Mr. Wilson, who' I was acquainted with during his visit to Georgia, I will give you what little information I am able respecting the birds you mention.

The Islands & lower Country of the Southern parts of Georgia is the great rendezvous of the Water birds but owing to the unhappy times chiefly and other circumstances I have never yet had the pleasure of visiting it. At the commencement of the War I had undertaken to make a collection of stuffed Birds & as a complete collection of Drawings of them in colors as I was able for a Gentleman in England but last fall in despair of seeing peace restored, I retired into the Country after having made about 220 Drawings thrown away a large collection of stuffed skins, have entirely laid it aside, & entered into another line of employment, where I am in hopes the mad and destructive Ambition of the rulers of the world can but little interfere.

The Carrion crow builds its nest in the large Trees of the thick swamps over the lakes and the low wet swamps, I have never seen the eggs but don't doubt they are in building the nest similar to the other kind, they retire every evening to the swamps to roost. They frequent the Butcher pens, Commons & the upper part of the Town where the People live who butcher hogs in great numbers & walk about the Streets like Domestic fowls. It is diverting to see when they throw out any entrails & offal of the hogs to see with what greediness they seize & scramble for it often one swallowing one end & another the other & pulling against each other till the strongest prevails, they often steal fresh meat when put out on a shed or other place to dry in the Sun and when a horse or dead cow is dragged out upon the commons they soon light upon it in great numbers, the dogs interrupt them but are serviceable to them in breaking the Animal up for them as I dont believe they themselves can get thro the skin as they begin at the eyes and vent. The Turkey Buzzard is accused of killing young Lambs & pigs by picking out their eyes, but I believe this sort does not. I have not observed a single T. Buzzard in Company with them, but a few of the latter frequent some of the outskirts of the Town & are also very gentle. It is only these that frequent the town & common that are so domestic for if you meet with any of either kind 2 or 3 miles from town, they are wild as the rest in the Country but neither species is by any means a shy bird in Georgia. Having killed one of the *V. aura* in the country as it became putrid the scent attracted several of the *V. atratus* to settle on the trees

round it, but they did not attempt to eat it. This latter species is not so plentiful in the country as about Savannah. Upon killing a beeve in the Country, the scent of the blood immediately attracts them and you will soon see them flying in the air gathering from different quarters to feed on the offal as soon as it is left. This is the case with both species.

The Raven only frequents the back inland Countries of Georgia & can inform you nothing more of it.

Both the Darters I esteem but of one species. I have only now by me a drawing of the male or black bellied but have had them both at one time, in the female I remember that the upper parts was similar to the male only the color and markings more pale and obscure, length 36 inches, 46 in extent, tips of both mandibles serrated pointing inwards. Frequent the ponds, rivers & creeks in the Summer, builds in Trees in Swamps & Islands in ponds &c. makes their nests of Sticks, often builds in the same tree annually Egg sky blue, a nest that was not very large had 2 eggs in it & 6 young ones of different sizes. Commonly sets on a stump in the water of mornings in the spring with its wings extended to the sun from which it is called by some people Sun Bird: difficult to be shot when swimming keeping its head only just above water.

The Purple Gallinule frequents the Rice fields & marshes in the lower parts, is rare, having only met with but 3 specimens, have no doubt but it breeds here is 12 inches in length. When alive, the naked crown or spot above the bill is bright blue, bill red lead, tip yellow ochree. Sides yellow brown. You dont mention the Cinirious Gallinule, about the same size & rarity, the spot or the crown as well as the upper part of the bill & garters red tip of the bill yellow. Is of the color much as the last the toes is larger in proportion than that of the former.

Coot (L $14\frac{1}{2}$ extent $25\frac{1}{2}$) frequents the Rice fields and ponds &c. in Winter, I dont know that it breeds here, if it does it is in y^e sⁿ parts the female is the palest in color, the spot on y^e forehead is a bright chestnut brown. I have been told there is 3 species of Coots in Georgia. I have had several at a time that was asserted to be of 2 species but upon a careful examination cou'd observe no difference (but in size) but what might arise from age or sex.

I can inform you nothing in respect to the *C. glacialis*. I had

a Loon once brought me alive of a plain color like a goose it was 30 Is. in length ext. 53 bill $3\frac{1}{4}$ long very sharp, roof of the mouth serrated. When found by the person in a path after a high wind it made immediately at him and struck him in his leg to the bone, its note or cry very loud and hollow.

The Soree certainly breeds here, there is numbers of the young ones in the Rice fields in the Summer, they differ materially from the Adults, I thought from the neatness of their marks & brightness of color (not usual in young birds) that they were a distinct species, 'till killing one late in Autumn more advanced in plumage convinced me of my mistake but no bird differs more in its growth than the large streaked Heron. I should have never believed them to be the same had I not killed them in the middle stages of plumage.

I will with pleasure give you any information you desire of any other birds or of several species of land Birds I am acquainted with if you desire it that I have not yet seen described in Mr. Wilson's work. Are you acquainted with the female yet of the Louisiana Kite. I have not yet procured one but observed sev^l flying last spring in Company with the males. I tried in vain to shoot one but could sev^l times have killed the males the tail appeared to be barred with brown. And remain Sir, with respect

Your obedient humble servant

John Abbot

George Ord Esq.
Philadelphia